

Professors Emeriti Network

Lifelong eLearning and eEducation

Dr. John Brennan, Professor Emeritus at Open University, UK
Honorary Research Fellow at Oxford University and Visiting Professor,
University of Bath UK
John.Brennan@Open.ac.uk

A contribution to the Zoom meeting of the Professors Emeriti Network
and the representatives of the network University eLearning and eEducation Group
September 29, 2021

The UK's Open University has recently had its 50th anniversary. It was established at the end of the 1960s as a university that was 'open to all'. It was a route into and through higher education for adults who, for a variety of reasons, had not entered higher education immediately after leaving school. The Open University's students studied part-time, typically combining their higher education with paid employment and/or domestic responsibilities. There were no entry requirements for most undergraduate courses.

Today, the Open University is the UK's largest university, in terms of student numbers, with over 120,000 part-time undergraduate students and over 50,000 postgraduates.

The education provided by the Open University has always been 'distance learning', initially through programmes on BBC television, together with books, reports and other printed documents, though also with local support provided by tutors which included seminar meetings with local students. However, for many years now, Open University courses have been delivered to students online, although students are still assigned tutors who they may meet face-to face.

The Open University has always offered a very broad curriculum, and offering students a wide choice of what and when to study. And also 'where' to study. The University operates across the four UK nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The University defines itself in terms of a vision and flexible approach which "supports people of all ages and backgrounds to study and achieve their potential".

However, the context for the Open University's work has changed significantly over its 50 years existence. The key changes include

- The massification of higher education, with the growth and expansion of other higher education institutions, together with the rise in the percentage of the population engaging in higher education from about 7% when the Open University was established to over 50% today.

- The arrival of new technologies establishing online learning and communication as an effective and increasingly popular method of providing education.
- Political change shifting governance and management to a more business model, with student fees replacing government funding as the main funding source for higher education.

More generally, the massification of higher education has been accompanied by an increasing diversification of higher education. Using Burton Clark's terms, diversification can be 'vertical' or 'horizontal', with the former referring to institutional 'reputation' and the latter referring to 'difference' in terms of what and how learning is delivered. The UK system is generally regarded as vertically differentiated.

Most recently, further changes have occurred as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. A large proportion of UK universities have been providing most of their teaching online with a lot of students working mainly from home. At the moment, there is a general expectation that a 'new normal' is likely to emerge with 'blended learning', this being a mixture of online and face-to-face learning.

A major development over the last decade has been the creation and development of FutureLearn, a social learning platform created by the Open University which provides online learning internationally with over 170 UK and international partner institutions. It offers short courses and online degrees which enable students to follow flexible learning pathways at different life stages, acquiring certificates and degrees from different sources and at different times. It has over 13million people signed up as learners worldwide. The learners follow online courses offered by different educational providers and there may or may not be a qualification at the end of the learning journey.

A lot of questions arise from these changes, including

- New skills required from academics to provide good quality online teaching?
- New professional support for students on education technology, constructing their curriculum from the many options available, careers advice etc etc.?
- Maintaining a social dimension to the student experience when it goes online?
- Supporting or preventing students from crossing institutional boundaries?
- Blending online and face-to-face learning, but also drawing on work experience, especially for older adult learners?
- If online learning following the FutureLearn model increases, will many traditional universities just disappear?
- Exploiting the benefits of the new whilst preserving the best of the past?